

Best Practice for Determining which Applications will be Unscored (Streamlining)

Background: A "triage" procedure has been used for a number of years at the NIH for the review of investigator-initiated grant applications. Beginning with the February 1995 round of study section meetings, all CSR regular study sections have incorporated a streamlined review process as part of their peer review procedures. Subsequently, this process was extended to the review of all R-mechanism applications. Only those applications judged highly meritorious are discussed at the study section meeting. The intent is to ensure ample time for in-depth discussion and discrimination of competitive applications. In many instances, the process results in shorter study section meetings and savings in costs. In an environment where a decreasing proportion of grant applications are being funded CSR believes that study sections could increase the streamline rate.

Streamlined Review Procedures: The Scientific Review Administrator (SRA) should discuss streamlining procedures with reviewers before the meeting to ensure that all reviewers clearly understand the procedure. The most effective practice for developing the list of potential unscored applications is to use an average of the preliminary scores entered in the Internet-Assisted Review (IAR) System by all assigned reviewers and readers. If possible, before the meeting contact telephone reviewers on applications below the potentially unscored line to determine whether they wish to discuss any of these applications [alternatively the telephone reviewer can be called when the application comes up in the normal rotation of applications]. The first, step is to consider the lower 60% of these average scores as forming the group of potentially unscored applications. Then remove from the list all applications for which at least one of the assigned reviewers scored the application in the region that defines the top 15% of preliminary average scores.

At the beginning of the meeting, before individual applications are discussed, the SRA or the Chair announces individually the applications (applicant's name and order of review) on the unscored list and asks the members if anyone wants the application discussed. Reviewers should be strongly discouraged from announcing that they were one of the reviewers. Rather any one interested in having the applications discussed should simply state so and no more. If no one calls for it to be discussed, the reviewers mark it unscored on the vote sheet. Since only an assigned reviewer may nominate an application to be streamlined, additional nominations for streamlining during the streamlining process are not allowed. Non-concurrence by only one member (whether regular or temporary) is sufficient to bring an application to full review at the meeting. Occasionally, it may also happen that study section members will unanimously agree, either at the outset of the meeting or later, during discussion of applications, to designate additional applications as not requiring full discussion and scoring.

If 50% of applications are not scored the remaining applications should receive scores in the range of 1.0 to 3.0. This will require reviewers to recalibrate and change scores from the preliminary scores assigned in IAR. It is best that this re-calibration be done when reviewers announce their initial level of enthusiasm for the application, before it is discussed in detail. If a reviewer believes that an application is in the lower half the reviewer should assign it a score of 3.0 or greater. Since all competing R01 applications reviewed by a study section, **whether scored or not**, are considered in the base for calculating percentiles, there is no mathematical advantage. Reviewers are asked to

modify their critiques, removing, for example, criticisms that are negated through discussion or by reading other critiques.

Even though mail reviewers do not vote, SRAs should provide them the scoring paradigm and have them post tentative numeric scores in IAR.

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